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WHAT IS DISTANCE LEARNING?

Although the label "distance learning" could be applied to any situation where students are learning at remote sites, the term is normally restricted to teaching via satellite or other long-distance telecommunication technology. One author defines distance learning as "an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner" (Perraton, 1980, p.10). Two-way communication between teacher and student can take place through writing, television phone-in programs, two-way video, or telephone (Davis, 1988). The label "distance learning" is catchy, but, unfortunately, easily over interpreted. Most systems to which this label is applied are simply one-way broadcasting stations that transmit audio and video signals to students at one or more remote sites. However, other systems are available that provide two-way audio, and, in some cases, even two-way video between the teacher and the students.

Distance learning technologies present many new options for teaching foreign languages that will further expand the range of instructional techniques in the same way that language labs, television, and computers have augmented the standard classroom. It is important in reviewing these distance learning options to distinguish among their various levels of capability as these systems place different constraints on the instructional process. For instance, one-way, presentation-only systems have been criticized as providing nothing more than a video distribution system that could be replicated by mailing video tapes to students. The lack of immediate two-way interaction that characterizes many distance education programs seems contrary to the aims of foreign language teaching. However, with this interaction appropriately used, distance technologies can support the goals of foreign language pedagogy. Instructional strategies that encourage student-teacher and student-student dialogue and learner autonomy in distance learning situations must be incorporated into instruction (Davis, 1988).

WHY IS DISTANCE LEARNING USED?

The strongest argument for distance education is its potential to provide instruction to students who, because of distance, time, or financial constraints, do not have access to

traditional learning opportunities or specialized courses (Davis, 1988). Distance learning courses have been developed to provide equal access to an educational opportunity for schools, especially rural ones, that have to operate with a limited curriculum and staff (Wohlert, 1989). The objective is to provide courses in foreign languages to schools where it would not otherwise be possible for students to study them. The potential for providing instruction in the less commonly taught languages is particularly enhanced by distance technology. In many cases, the guiding principle is for distance learning courses not to become permanent, but to serve as a stepping stone to hiring a regular classroom instructor by laying the basis for a viable language program, especially in the less commonly taught languages (Kataoka, 1987).

HOW CAN DISTANCE LEARNING PROVIDE THE INTERACTION NECESSARY FOR

DEVELOPING FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS?The success of distance learning in developing students' foreign language skills depends on the ability of the instructional program to provide language learning in face-to-face settings. This capability can now be provided through two-way satellite communications that allow teachers to communicate with students at each site and to provide the interaction needed for development of second language skills.

WHY HASN'T THIS TWO-WAY OPTION BEEN USED MORE EXTENSIVELY?

Using satellite broadcasts for true telecommunications, rather than merely as a delivery and distribution system for canned video presentations, is still very expensive. Television signals are more expensive to transmit than voice signals because of the increased amount of electronic information that must be transmitted. Because sufficient information is transmitted to refresh the video display screen thirty times a second, most of this information is associated with the video portion of the signal. To reduce the amount of information transmitted and, therefore, the communication costs, newer technologies compress the audio and video signals prior to transmission. For the same reason, they also refresh the video image at a slower rate, which makes the movements of the teacher and students appear blurred and choppy. Although this level of resolution is adequate to establish two-way communication for video teleconferences, the picture sampling rate is inadequate to capture detailed lip movements, giving the impression that the audio track is not always synchronized with the picture. This lack of video detail is normally only a minor irritant, but it could be important in trying to teach or demonstrate correct pronunciation.

ARE THERE EXAMPLES OF PROGRAMS THAT TEACH LANGUAGES VIA DISTANCE

LEARNING?The British and Canadian governments have both tried teaching languages through distance education. The national British program, established to teach French by radio and television, found it beneficial to augment the broadcasts with a course-linked magazine to increase learner involvement, with local study groups to allow students the opportunity to practice the language learned in the course, and with a telephone question-and-answer service to provide students with a channel for two-way communication (Rybak, 1984). A Canadian home study program was implemented in Manitoba, Ontario, and British Columbia to teach English as a second language using the telephone. Students work through units in a workbook using audiotapes. At specified points in each unit, the teacher provides the student with feedback over the telephone. The telephone conversation also provides the student with oral practice. The teacher records the telephone conversation and sends a tape to the student to review. A 1988 evaluation of the program revealed that both teachers and students were satisfied with the program (Selman, 1988).

In the United States, the number of foreign language programs using distance learning is growing, and at least six states offer foreign language instruction to outlying schools through satellite communication technology. Most of these programs are broadcast from a central location and have local teaching assistants who interact with the students. In a few instances, two-way, interactive instruction is provided. Two counties in Maryland have interactive distance learning programs that use standard cable TV technology, and the Mississippi State Department of Education is now developing the same capability using fiber optic technology.

"The Televised Japanese Language Program," developed at North Carolina State University (NCSU), provides instruction in Japanese to ten colleges and universities in five Southeastern states. The program videotapes a live, unrehearsed class session at NCSU and then sends the unedited videotape to participating institutions. Students view the videotapes and participate in the course by 1) doing practice activities designed by NCSU instructors (for many of the exercises, additional visual aids are sent to the participating institutions); 2) completing the same homework assignments as those given to NCSU students; 3) taking the same quizzes and exams as those taken by NCSU students; 4) having access to special telephone office hours with NCSU instructors; and 5) visiting the NCSU instructor on campus. A native Japanese-speaking tutor is present in each classroom during the video presentation and afterwards to help students with the activities (Kataoka, 1987).

HOW EFFECTIVE IS FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING VIA DISTANCE LEARNING?

Several studies have been conducted on student achievement in distance education foreign language courses, but because of small sample sizes or non-random selection of students, the results are difficult to interpret. In university-level Japanese, no

statistically significant differences were found between the classroom-based students at North Carolina State University and the students participating in the "Televised Japanese Language Program" (Kataoka, 1987).
In one experimental study, researchers found that after two semesters of German instruction, students enrolled in a telecourse did not achieve the proficiency levels attained by on-campus students taking the same course (Johnson and Van Iten, 1984). However, in the case of high school "German by Satellite" classes, where the university textbook and other materials are used, and where grades are based on university standards, the test data indicated that 18 percent of all students in the program were earning an unadjusted grade of A. In addition to test scores, "German by Satellite" students had top placement in seven interscholastic contests (Wohlert, 1989).

WHAT ARE SOME KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMS?

- Live interaction between the instructor and the students during the course.

- The presence of a classroom teacher in the remote sites who is involved in the learning process. In some cases, these cooperating or coordinating teachers are studying the language along with the students with the intention of completing a teaching minor.

- The regular use of other media, such as computers, speech recognition devices, audiotapes, and workbooks in a comprehensive approach to distance learning (Wohlert, 1989).

- The involvement and support of school administrators.

- The use of electronic mailboxes (which all students and cooperating site teachers use), or a toll-free phone number with recording machine.

CONCLUSION

Is distance learning the next best thing to being there? Experience to date provides only an ambiguous answer. A cross-discipline review of distance learning by the United

States Congress, Office of Technology Assessment (1989), reports that, in most cases, distance learning appears to be as effective as on site, face-to-face instruction in the classroom, but evidence in K-12 education is incomplete. It is clear that the teaching of foreign languages presents special instructional challenges. In those situations where geographic or administrative factors mandate distance learning as the preferred delivery option, it must be remembered that the amount of communicative interaction provided will be a crucial factor in the foreign language acquisition process.

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RESOURCES

Satellite Services offering Foreign Language Courses (adapted from Media & Methods, Sep/Oct 1989, pp22-23).

The Arts and Sciences Teleconferencing Service (ASTS) (German, Russian). Part of the Midlands Consortium Star Schools Project. Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078-0276.

The Satellite Communications Educational Programming Network (STEP) (Japanese, Spanish, English). ESD 101, W. 1025 Indiana Ave., Spokane, WA 99205.

TI-IN (Japanese, Spanish, Foreign Language Alternatives Laboratory, Foreign Language in the Elementary School, and teacher training programs) TI-IN Network, 1000 Central Pkwy North, Suite 1908, San Antonio, TX 78232 (512) 490-3900.

The Satellite Educational Resources Consortium (SERC) (Japanese, Russian, teacher in-service courses) (800) 476-5001.

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